

ViralStJames Bible Study #22: The Invitation you don't want to refuse

The Background

John 1 35-51

With the Alpha course looming, it is a good time to look at how John describes the calling of the first disciples to follow Jesus. There is a mixture of curiosity, humour and insight in these small cameos and like a lot of John's Gospel, there are references to the Old Testament, the future and the past. Like an Alpha course can point people in the right direction, there are events here that can be seen for what they are by those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Sometimes this is a little more difficult for us, as we are separated by almost 2000 years from the original audience that John wrote for, but with a bit of digging, there is much to be revealed.

The passage opens after Jesus's baptism, where John the Baptist has just testified to Jesus being the Son of God.

The Passage – John 1:35-51

John 1:35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

John 1:43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The Questions

- 1) The question Jesus asks the first two disciples wishing to follow him is this: **What do you want? (v38) What is your answer to that question?**
 - *If we are asking others to consider who Jesus is and why they should follow him, as these two disciples did, we need to know the reason we do so.*
 - *Would you agree with the testimony of John the Baptist in 1:34?*

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- 2) The disciples answer is perhaps at first glance underwhelming – ‘Where are you staying? – but it does reveal a desire to spend time with Jesus, to get to know him. Jesus replies ‘Come, and you will see’ (v39). Do you think this invitation still stands? Are we still open to it?
- *The invitation is just the beginning – the disciples didn't simply stay for the night, but found a life-long commitment*
 - *Another word for staying is abiding – what does it mean to ‘abide’ with Jesus?*
- 3) The church grows when those who are followers of Jesus invite others to follow. Andrew starts with his own family and his brother Simon (v41). What does he say to get his attention? What would you say today to invite others?
- *Andrew tells his brother that they have found ‘The Messiah’ – this was a Jewish word meaning ‘anointed one’ and was associated with the concept of a deliverer of the Jews from their pagan enemies. Much of the rest of John's Gospel is taken up with Jesus explaining to the disciples that whilst he is the ‘deliverer’, he is there to deliver all people, not just the Jews, and to free them from slavery to their self-centred ways, not simply replacing one political power (the Romans) with another.*
 - *Telling people today that Jesus is their ‘messiah’ may not cut through today – but tell them that he is the one in whom life in all its fullness can be found might provoke more curiosity. We speak from what we know.*
- 4) When Simon is brought to Jesus, he is given a new name (Cephas/Peter, which both mean ‘rock’ (v42). Can you think of other examples in the Bible of people being given new names? What do you think it signifies?
- *Jacob becomes Israel (he struggles with God) after his encounter with God in Genesis 32:22-30*
 - *Abram becomes Abraham (father of many nations) when entering the covenant with God in Genesis 17:1-8*
 - *On each occasion, it signifies a decisive, transformative encounter with God.*
 - *Meeting with God/Jesus is a transforming event and one that becomes life changing. To some perhaps, the change is rapid, but for others (including Peter and perhaps more commonly), it is an ongoing lifelong change that may have its ups and downs.*
- 5) The group of disciples continues to grow, with Philip added to the list (v43), who then goes and finds Nathanael (v45). How does he describe Jesus to Nathanael? Can you recall any other mention in the Gospels of ‘Moses and the Prophets’ pointing to Jesus?
- *He refers to Jesus as the one who both Moses and the Prophets wrote about.*
 - *In Luke 24:25-27, Jesus, in one of his post-resurrection appearances speaks to two disciples on the road to Emmaus ‘and beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself’.*
 - *John, in writing his Gospel, is thus at an early stage alerting his readers to the fact that Moses and the prophets point to Jesus as the culmination of God's revelation of himself – who he is and what he is like*

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6) Rivalries between different towns in Galilee appear to be somewhat similar to today's rivalries between local football supporters! Nathanael cannot imagine anything good coming out of Nazareth – but Philip offers the same invitation Jesus offered earlier to the first disciples - 'come and see' (v46). What makes Nathanael change his mind?

- *Nathanael is convinced by meeting Jesus and by the words he says. Some may appear dismissive of Jesus at first, but when they have the opportunity to meet him, perhaps in our day through courses such as Alpha, they may be convinced – the convincing will be the work of the Spirit, the invitation to 'come and see' may be extended by us.*
- *The words Jesus uses to address Nathanael were ones rooted in the Old Testament (then the Hebrew Scriptures) which would have been well known to Nathanael. In v47, the words hark back to Jacob, who was named 'the deceiver' at birth and cheated his brother in his early life before being transformed in his wrestle with God and receiving the name 'Israel'. Jesus was suggesting that Nathanael was like the transformed Jacob.*
- *In v 48, the reference to seeing Nathanael 'still under the fig tree' may be a reference to Micah 4.v4 where in the age of the Messiah 'every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree and no one will make them afraid'. These two references to the Hebrew Scriptures may well explain why Nathanael is so rapidly convinced that this man is more than just a teacher, but the true King of Israel.*

7) Meeting Jesus and believing in him is just the start. Jesus promises Nathanael 'that you will see greater things than that' (v50). The implication is that this is just the beginning and more, far more is to come. What do you think Jesus meant by the picture he gives in v31? Is your experience of following Jesus one of growing in knowledge and understanding?

- As with much of this passage, the reference is to Jacob and on this occasion to his dream recorded in Genesis 28:10-17. Jesus is using figurative language - in essence, he is saying that he is the place where heaven and earth meet, (akin to the ladder in the dream) the place where you can meet with God, the one who makes God visible on earth. John uses the rest of his Gospel to demonstrate the reality of this claim.
- The claim is thus an encouragement to Nathanael to stick around. It is like saying 'you ain't seen nothing yet'. The unfolding events of John's Gospel bear this out, starting with the transformation of the water into wine at the wedding in Cana in the very next chapter.

8) Is there anything here that encourages you? What do you think is the good news in this passage?